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CLASSIFICATION MAKING

BY CHARLES A. FLAGG, *Librarian, Bangor (Me.) Public Library*

In classification making, as in all varieties of one's mental output, a clear and logical outline or plan of development is essential, but amateur classification makers seem too prone to rest satisfied in the belief that logical outline is everything, to assume that they are classifying ideas and not books. Ideas can be labeled and marshaled into a beautiful array to the satisfaction of almost any one who will devote the time to it; work with books is not equally conducive to self-complacency.

I do not know whether the question before us means the making of an entirely new classification or the recasting or expansion of an existing one. The problems are somewhat different, but as the one concerns very few of us while the other meets most libraries first or last, I shall devote myself to the latter.

We must assume that the worker has a fairly good idea of the subject to be covered and a recognition both of the general principles of the scheme he is enlarging and of the importance of making the new development harmonize with them. He should gain a clear view of his subject from as many angles as possible, while simultaneously gathering classifications and bibliographies of it already worked out (and surprisingly few of us ever have the opportunity to do actual pioneer work). If, by this time, he has found a scheme whose logical arrangement and degree of minuteness appeal to him as approximating his need, he should adopt that for test purposes, freely altering wherever there appears a chance for improvement. If no scheme is offered that seems satisfactory he should now be able to draw up a rough one to start with.

The first test is a very careful application of his outline to a small collection of popular literature of the subject. If the subject is one possessed of an older litera-

ture, provision should be made for obsolete theories, ancient terminology, etc. We cannot sacrifice the knowledge of hypotheses accepted today, but the scheme must provide for at least these two varieties of the unscientific literature—popular and obsolete works.

Above all, the classification maker should keep his mind open and discard every scrap of the original outline if another line of subdivision seems really better, remembering that the supreme test usually will not be Right and Wrong, but Expediency.

Now the worker should be ready for the great and final test—the application of the scheme to the largest collection on the subject available, for the purpose of checking and improving the outline as it stands, of expanding it to meet the needs of the library, and of providing, as far as possible, for the future development of the subject. Finally there remains the work of comparing the arrangement with schemes in hand, and of conferring with their makers and others interested.

If I may be permitted to add a few general criticisms of my own on classification makers of the past, from the standpoint of a classifier of today, the first would be that they are inclined to let the notation speak too much for itself. I believe that the maker should not aim at brevity, but rather, from the fulness of his experience in testing, should so define the class that the classifier will not need to refer to precedent. There is no real advantage in the apparent symmetry of balancing one class number against one pithy word or expression as exact equivalents. Sometimes we can most easily show what we mean to include under a given number by pointing out what aspects of the subject or what closely allied subjects go elsewhere.

I am not unmindful of possible defenses of the policy of having broad general classes and principles, for two distinct

reasons: that a certain amount of indefiniteness is desirable for future development, and that one line of cleavage might suit one library while it would not appeal to another. No matter how carefully a scheme is prepared, development is bound to be needed in unexpected places, and these must be provided for by the individual libraries or through some central organization. Clearly it is in the interest of uniformity that such decisions should be made in advance whenever possible. I freely admit that different types of libraries prefer different treatment of material, but even here it seems to me better to express a preference for one plan over the other.

I may sum up by asking that a scheme of classification include its own com-

mentary. The eagerness with which classifiers welcome an authoritative list of works classed under the scheme they favor, and the diversity discovered when usage of various libraries is compared, proves the need of this, if it is granted that a national or widely used scheme of classification is desirable at all.

Another general criticism: Shall we classify by topics or by aspects? Classifications, as found in use, are ill provided with general numbers for subjects where the general popular works and the encyclopedic treatises may go without forcing us to weigh each contribution of the sort carefully in order to discover which side receives the fullest treatment in that particular instance.

CLASSIFICATION

By J. CHRISTIAN BAY, *Chief Classifier, The John Crerar Library, Chicago*

To build a classification system requires a mental activity and a practical sense similar to what is required in the planning and building of a house. Both structures are aimed to be used by live humanity. The books at our elbow contain the first suggestion for their systematic arrangement. A second suggestion is contained in the history of the subjects of which they treat. Another helpful hint is contained in the purpose and the actual use of that library through which the books are offered for public use.

Time was when the patrons of a library seemed quite unconcerned about the professional art of the librarian. We have inherited from that time a system of cataloging which fails much in conveying an adequate impression of the books to the minds of the readers. In the building of classification schemes, we now are awake to the fact that books can be arranged so that readers endowed with good will and ordinary intelligence can comprehend the result. But the use of a library contains

many a valuable suggestion for the classification scheme.

This suggestion serves as a useful counter-irritant to that tendency toward a hermetic and sacred exclusiveness which develops in almost any profession. Many of us undoubtedly have constructed classification schemes in the spirit that we were organizing the science, or subject, and putting its literary monuments in order, as if we were arranging a bibliography. This is a noble ambition, but it may mislead us entirely. Even the most systematic arrangement of subjects within a science or an art may fail to locate properly many of the very books we are striving to accommodate.

One of the first requisites in classification building seems to be determining the natural place of the library's books as viewed by the relative locality of the subject and the use of the books. This means a logical balance between a scientifically defensible arrangement and the anticipated use. This balance can be struck only